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ASPECTS OF THE THEME OF KING AND GODDESS IN IRISH LITERATURE

(suite et fin)

BY

PROINSIAS MAC CANA

C. Conclusion

When I first undertook this discussion of the above theme, I was aware that the tales in which it was known to occur all concerned heroines associated with periods for which there is little or no historical background. My aim was to show that it remained as a living, or at least formative, conception within the historical period, in this connection say from the seventh century to the tenth, when Irish oral tradition was becoming largely transformed into a written one and a strong creative impulse was giving rise to a considerable body of new literature. This I hope to have done successfully in the preceding two articles. I further intended to trace its continued influence down through the remaining centuries of Irish history, but this, I have come to feel, might be more suitably reserved for a complete survey of the theme of King and Goddess throughout the whole of Irish literature and tradition.

The importance of the theme has long been acknowledged, but it is only gradually that we are coming to a full realization of its persistence and vigour. It is said of Medb Lethderg that she cohabited with nine of the kings of Ireland and that she would not allow any king in Tara who did not have her for his wife¹. Thus runs the

1. Cf. *supra*, VII, 89, n. 1.

most blatant expression of the belief or tradition that it was only through union with the territorial goddess of Ireland or her provinces that legal title to the kingship might be won. I have tried to show that it is this same mythological relationship which has been superimposed on a short seventh century section of the Munster regnal list in the story of Mór Muman, the implication being that it was through marriage with Mór that Fíngen mac Aeda and Cathal mac Aeda became rightful kings of Munster. The question which springs to mind is, Did the storyteller responsible for this tale have no other object in mind but to create a little quasi-historical narrative embodying a well known traditional theme, or had he some more practical motive? He associates the kingship with the Eoganachta of Caisel, Glennamain and Áine, that is to say, with the eastern Eoganacht septs, whose monopoly of the kingship lasted until the middle of the eighth century. The story of Mór Muman might therefore be in effect a restatement of their right to the kingship dating from the period when their monopoly had been broken; or alternatively it might have been intended to support the right of the Eoganachta in face of the growing claim of the Dál gCais, who finally secured the kingship for themselves in the course of the tenth century.

Lest it be thought that we are reading too much into this piece of narrative, it is well to keep in mind the simple fact that Irish poets down through the ages persisted in identifying the rightful king as the lawful husband of the territorial goddess, until finally in the eighteenth century the exiled Stuarts came to be regarded as the rightful spouses of Éire instead of those foreigners who then held her in thrall¹. It might furthermore be

1. For a collection of references see O'Rahilly, *Ériu* XIV, 17 ff.

recalled that Dub Ruis, of whom we know scarcely anything apart from the story associated with his name, is in one source included in the list of the kings of Munster, a fact which might easily be anticipated from the nature of the tale. This exceptional occurrence of his name among the Munster kings thus serves to confirm our interpretation of such tales in so far as they relate to the historical kingship, and this confirmation is all the more striking in that the story exists only in a Modern Irish version.

When we consider the Mór Muman and Dub Ruis tales, as well as the many other known instances of the king and goddess theme and the numerous minor allusions to it, it emerges as a self-evident fact that this theme was an integral element of the historical and political consciousness of the early Irish - or of the classes who interested themselves in such matters as history and politics, and, of course, literature. That being so, we might expect it to manifest itself in many other different, and less obvious, ways throughout the pages of the early literature and historical records. It is a noteworthy characteristic of many of the Irish tales of wooing and elopement that it is the lady - as, for instance, Deirdre, Gráinne, and Créd - who takes the initiative and persuades the hero to violate the bonds of loyalty to her husband by becoming her lover. Undoubtedly this is in great measure due to the fact that the heroines of early Irish tradition were originally goddesses who still retained something of their significance and authority even in the refurbished versions of their stories set down in writing by monastic scribes from the seventh century onwards. Their mantle then fell upon those historical heroines around whom new tales were created more or less on the pattern of the ancient traditional types. For example, it seems clear that the traditional conception of the goddess-heroines has

influenced the formation of the legends associated with the tenth and eleventh century Gormlaiths, the one the wife of Niall Glúndub, the other of Brian Bóroma.

Remembering how aware the ruling and literary classes were of the deep-rooted tradition of the fruitful union of king and goddess, one wonders did aspirants to the kingship of Ireland, or of one of its provinces, ever seek to assert their own authority and challenge that of the reigning monarch by actually making off with his queen. This possibility is suggested by what we know of that intriguing figure, Feidlimid mac Crimthainn, king of Caiseal. Apparently he had designs on the kingship of Ireland, and according to some Munster sources he did in fact achieve his aim. In A. I. s.a. 838, he is said to have obtained the submission of Niall mac Aeda (i.e. Niall Caille) at Cluain Ferta, whereupon he became full king of Ireland. Two years later, according to the same source he harried Leth Cuinn and came as far as Tara, where he seized Gormlaith, daughter of Murchad (r. of Donnchad) together with her female retinue¹. This Gormlaith, who in her obit in AU s.a. 860 is described as *amenissima regina Scotorum* (cf. FM 859, CS 861), was Niall Caille's wife². The question we might ask ourselves is: Assuming that Feidlimid did in fact carry out this abduction of the queen from the traditional seat of the high-kingship, did he have an eye to tradition when doing so? Was his action intended partly to suggest that just as he had taken possession of Niall's spouse of flesh and blood, so also was he in virtual possession of that other

1. The ravaging of the midland area as far as Tara by Feidlimid is noted in AU s. a. 839, FM 839, CS 840, but there is no mention of the rape of Gormlaith. It would appear from the Annals that Niall himself was elsewhere engaged on a similar expedition at the time.

2. Gilla Modutu names her as the mother of Aed Finnliath, Niall's son (RC XLVII, 310; LL 140 b 41).

spouse claimed by Niall, namely the kingdom of Ireland. I mention this merely as a possible example of the less obvious ways in which the well known theme of king and goddess might have affected historical events and their recording. To suggest it at all, some may feel, is to give too free a rein to the imagination, but, as against that, is the attitude it implies as existing among the warring kings of the ninth century really very different from that attested by an entry in the Annals some one hundred and fifty years later, which notes that the men of Leth Guinn, led by Mael Sechlainn mac Domnaill, plundered the territory of Dál gCais and cut down the Tree of Mag Adair, which was sacred to the Dál gCais and was later recognized as the inauguration place of the kings of Uí Briain (AI 982, CS 980, FM 981) ?¹ The actions of both Crimthann and Maelsechlainn, if authentic, had the obvious aim of slighting the royal prestige of dangerous opponents through violating certain of its traditional attributes.

The king and goddess theme is in itself quite simple, but, as the references in the two preceding articles have shown, it takes on a comparative complexity of form in Irish literature. There is for instance Ériu, of whom we have a rather stylised and statuesque representation in *Baile in Scáil*, where she is shown as a lady wearing a golden crown and seated on a crystal throne, while dispensing to each successive king of Ireland a draught of red liquor in a golden cup. There is Medb Lethderg, and the more diffuse and heavily rationalized traditions of her double, Medb of Connacht. And as well as such generalized versions of the theme, we have a number of instances falling into three distinct categories, namely those depicting the goddess as (i) an ugly hag transformed

1. Cf. also AI, 1051, 1089, 1111.

into a beautiful lady by the embraces of the hero destined to be king, e.g. the Niall Noígiallach and Lugaid Laígde tales, (ii) a wild wandering female who is restored to sanity and beauty through union with the rightful king, e.g. the tales about Mór Muman and Mis, and (iii) a girl of royal birth brought up among cowherds and elevated again to her due dignity through marriage to the king, e. g. the story of Ethne, the fosterling of Buchet (cf. VII, 87 *supra*), and that of Mess Buachalla, who was reared among cowherds and eventually became the wife of Eterscélae, king of Tara¹. Any comprehensive survey of the theme of the king and the goddess throughout Irish literature and tradition must inevitably include an examination of all these several types.

By way of conclusion I should like to refer briefly to the subject of the first of these articles, Mór Muman. I there tried to show that she was basically identical with the goddess Mugain, of whom traces are preserved in tales and toponymy, and whose name is preserved in the old genitive form *Maigne* in sept-names such as *Dál Maigne*. I did not succeed in showing in detail how the name *Mugain* became transformed into *Mór Muman*, but I did cite one text implying an identification of *Mugain* and *Mumu* used as district-names, the latter replacing the former in a later version of the particular context in question. It did not occur to me at the time that the appellation *Mór Maigne Moigi Siúil* occurs in a poem dating from approximately the eleventh century in which the poet purports to console Mór, daughter of Donnchad, on the loss of a pet goose. According to Meyer the reference in Mór's epithet is to « Moyne village in the centre of the parish of Moyne, 4 3/4 miles N. E. of Thurles »,

1. *Togail Bruidne Da Derga*, § 5 ; *Tochmarc Étaine*, ed. Bergin and Best, p. 56 (= Ériu XII, 188).

while Mag Siúil would be the plain in the barony of Eliogarty¹; but, as Professor Gerard Murphy observes, these identifications can hardly be regarded as certain². Without going into the matter in any detail, I would mention the fact that the expression *Mór Maigne* provides a strange echo to the several observations made above in connection with Mór Muman. Is this mere coincidence, or does it represent the use of a traditional appellation, *Mór Maigne*, to refer to an historical queen bearing the name Mór (With the possible exception of the last quatrain, the poem is addressed to Mór, the wife of Mael Sechlainn, king of Ireland) ?

1. Fianaigecht, p. 42.

2. Early Irish Lyrics, p. 213.
